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THE
SPIRITUAL FISHERMAN;
OR,
CHARACTER, COMPLAINT, DUTY,
and RESOLUTION,
OF AN
EVANGELICAL MINISTER.
Attempted to be REPRESENTED and IMPROVED,
IN A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT THE
ANNUAL MEETING OF MINISTERS,
AT THE
OLD MEETING-PLACE, BROAD-STREET, READING,
Bucks, August 29th, 1789.

By SAMUEL STEVENS.

Published at the Request of MINISTERS and
PEOPLE.

Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Matt. iv. 19.

LONDON:
Printed for the AUTHOR
And sold by E. and C. DILLY, in the Poultry.
MDCCLXXXIX.



TO THE
REVEREND MINISTERS,
AND THE
RESPECTABLE SOCIETY
OF
PROTESTANT DISSENTERS,
AT READING,
THE FOLLOWING
S E R M O N,
PUBLISHED AT THEIR UNANIMOUS REQUEST,
IS MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,
BY
THEIR OBEDIENT HUMBLE SERVANT,
THE AUTHOR.



St. Luke's Gospel, Chap. v. Ver. 5.

*And Simon answering, said unto him,
Master, we have toiled all the night,
and have taken nothing; nevertheless,
at thy word, I will let down the net.*

HARD fortune indeed! poor fishermen!
poor ministers! Such ill success at-
tending their best endeavours, might well
constrain them to utter the words before us,
and almost prevent them from making any
future attempts: because, considering the time
they had painfully spent, and the means they
had conscientiously employed, they might rea-
sonably have expected to have had their endea-
vours crowned with considerable success, in-
stead of having so much real occasion for
complaining, with a dejected mind and sor-
rowful lips, *Master, we have toiled all the
night, and have taken nothing.*

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In

+ alias, providence.

In the close of the preceding, and also in the beginning of this chapter, we have a pleasing account of the places, with the manner, in which our divine Emmanuel condescended to exercise his ministerial office : a preacher, who, through his own merit, excited the curiosity of all parties among the Jews, and gained himself an amazing audience. Universal fame having proclaimed abroad his deserved character, as a most extraordinary teacher sent of God, he instantly became exceeding popular. Multitudes crowded upon him whenever he was publicly engaged ; particularly “ when preaching the kingdom of God,” in the synagogues of Galilee, where the people press’d so much to hear the word, that it obliged him to look out for some more extensive and convenient place, for that sacred and important purpose : “ wherefore, being by the lake of Gennesareth, he saw two ships standing by the lake, into one of which he immediately enters,” having previously disposed the mind of its owner, Simon Peter, to bid him a hearty welcome. This ship our Divine Orator converts directly into a pulpit, and PRAYS Simon to “ thrust out a little from the land.” You will observe, that
Jesus

Jesus and his religion always teach Christians decency and good manners, and which are an essential ornament to piety and virtue. "The life of Christ is a model of perfection, set before us for our imitation." Simon having complied with the request, Jesus seats himself upon some eminence in the ship, both for his own convenience and the congregation's advantage, from whence he begins immediately to teach the multitude, who stood upon the shore to receive spiritual instruction from him.

It is extremely evident from this conduct of Christ and his hearers, that pure religion doth not consist in places, modes, and forms, but in a vital principle seated in the heart, and expressed in the life of every real professor. As the great Author and Finisher of our faith himself preached in a ship, so his gospel may be still preached and heard in any place, and at any season, if the same be engaged in with a zeal according to knowledge, and discharged with decency, order, and judgment. I am very sorry, there is so much reason painfully to subjoin here, that many of the most worthy and able ministers of the New Testament, are, to their no small concern, total strangers, in this irreligious age, to such a pleasing necessity

of seeking, like their Divine Master, for larger places, on the same delightful occasion. Simon having obliged Christ, he, in return, speedily rewards his kindness, and the use of his bark, by enabling him to spread his net to better purpose than before; so that piety towards God, and love to mankind, "shall in no wise lose their reward." No sooner did Simon and his brother-fishermen let down their net in chearful obedience to the divine command, but they succeeded beyond all reasonable expectation in their fresh attempt; so that what was refused them one night for wise ends, was liberally bestowed upon them the next. This memorable circumstance obviously hints to us, that scenes, both of adversity and prosperity, are by the special permission of Heaven; by such methods, and at such seasons, as God shall please in his infinite wisdom to permit, for his own honour, and his people's best interest for both worlds. In all his dispensations he ever consults their welfare, though they may often think otherwise through the unhappy prevalence of unbelief. But this they shall sooner or later experience, with venerable Jacob, to be a certain fact, to the

the glory of God and their highest satisfaction.

So great was the number of fishes inclosed in the net, when let down at the Saviour's command, that the net brake; upon which Simon and his brother Andrew call to their partners in the other ship, James and John the sons of Zebedee, to come to their assistance; and thus, with the great draught, they so filled both the ships that they were in danger of sinking. Simon immediately, with fear, threw himself at the feet of Jesus, intreating him to depart from so sinful a person. To allay his fear, strengthen, and comfort him, the Saviour presently tells him, "Henceforth thou shalt catch men;" or, according to a similar passage, Matt. iv. 19. "he saith unto Simon and Andrew his brother, Follow me, and I will make you *fishers of men*."

Now, as the Gospel is compared to a net, the world to the sea, men to fish, and ministers to fishermen, by the best of precedents, Christ himself, I shall thus consider the words, and hope it will not be deem'd improper on the present annual occasion.

From this instructive passage, we may too affectingly observe, that though the public

lie dispensers of the Gospel toil long and labour much, it is comparatively but to little purpose; though they study closely, and preach skilfully, yet, like Simon and his partners, they take but few fish, win but few souls over to the love of Christ and holiness.

The following particulars are worthy of our regard.

I. With what propriety ministers of the Gospel may be stiled fishermen.

II. What sort of influence, providential disappointments attending the faithful execution of their office, necessarily hath upon them.

III. Which are the most fatal causes of their ill success: And

IV. Conscientious ministers must, and ever will, view it as their indispensable duty, to persevere amidst every discouraging scene, to their dying moments.

First, let us consider with what propriety ministers of the Gospel may be stiled fishermen. A great similarity apparently subsists between them, in point of EMPLOYMENT, DILIGENCE, FATIGUE, PATIENCE, HAZARD, PERSEVERANCE, and SUCCESS.

Ist. Ministers of the Gospel are fitly stiled fishermen, respecting *similarity of employment.*

ployment. That which is the employment of one in a temporal, is the employment of the other in a spiritual view, it being the immediate business of both to spread their different net; though, while the former are engaged to catch fish for themselves, with the rest of mankind, the latter are engaged in catching precious and immortal souls for Christ and Heaven, by casting the Gospel net over this universal sea, the world, on purpose to take persons who are as thoughtlessly, as swiftly swimming down the impure streams of iniquity to the fatal gulph, and happily draw them to the peaceful shore of immortal life and glory. Sins, were but the success of spiritual fishermen equal to their ardent wishes, mean as their calling may appear to a sneering world, they would not exchange it for the most dignified titles, or lucrative stations, on earth: but whether their success be much, little, or nothing, as it may best please their Divine Master, from whom they receive every essential qualification for a reputable and successful discharge of their ministerial office, who alone can make the fishers skilful, and fishing successful; nevertheless, it is the habitual employment of such, to spread the Gospel

Gospel net, to preach the divine word, to make known to all the "kingdom of Heaven," and, with all love and pious affections, to press sinners to faith, genuine repentance, holiness, and evangelical obedience of heart and life, agreeable to their first commission and original instructions, with submission, leaving the event of all to God; "for the kingdom of Heaven is like unto a net cast into the sea,—Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations.—And, Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." That, my brethren, was the Apostles encouragement, and let it be our's also.

ed. Ministers of the Gospel are fitly stiled fishermen in point of *diligence*; which is as essential as it is honourable to persons of the meanest occupation, but to a fisherman in particular. If he would be successful in his calling, such a one will surely be found, like Simon and Andrew, by the sea-side, at all proper seasons, casting his net, and aiming for a draught. Exactly thus will he be imitated by the man who is not merely stiled, but who is truly worthy of that very honourable, though too much despised character, a Spiritual Fisherman. A real minister of Christ will be extremely diligent in his important office; he will

will not be idle or slothful, but, on the contrary, active and fervent in his great work, ever seeking to pluck souls fettered in sin from the tyranny of Satan and their lusts, and to present them joyfully to Christ, in whose omnipotent arms alone they can be both safe and happy for ever. You will readily believe, that ministers of this spirit and disposition will never want incentives to duty; they will rather need, at certain seasons, some prudent restraints, out of necessary pity to a feeble body, which often hath not strength equal to its zealous inhabitant, in the animating service of Christ and sinners. In this best of causes, God and Religion, it is all life and vigour, and "often sick nigh unto death," through genuine love to Christ and his valuable flock. "Receive such a servant of Jesus then, with all gladness, and hold him in reputation;" because, in whatever he may be deemed slack, negligent, and slothful, respecting his secular interest and personal ease, he is resolved (through divine aid) never, never to be deservedly thought so in his sacred business, either by God or man. He is fully determined "to shew himself to all, a man fervent in spirit, serving the Lord," as one, possessed of a spirit of zeal, yet tempered with Christian

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moderation, and regulated by divine prudence, in the diligent execution of his most noble employment. This is the object of his highest ambition during his mortal existence, whatever may prove in providence the final result of this his diligent and active conduct.

3d. Ministers of the Gospel are fitly styled fishermen in point of *similarity of fatigue*. The kind of fishing here referred to is a very laborious employment, as is very easy to be conceived; careening the vessel, cleaning and laying abroad the tackle, and other services, is the business of such a one when on shore, besides various exercises when at sea, which unavoidably weary the body, and exhaust the spirits of the laborious fisherman; as Peter, with his partners, knew experimentally. Fit emblem this, of a spiritual fisherman's labour and experience in a conscientious performance of all those stated and occasional duties which are inseparably connected with his momentous calling; especially when the flesh is weak through a delicate constitution. How frequently do ministers, as the benevolent friends of mankind, not only plead and preach in the pulpit, and administer the seals of the covenant, visiting also the sick of their flocks, and seasonably discharge every other

other branch of duty connected with their sacred character? But how often, how long are they studying and pleading in their closets? While their stated, and perhaps too prayerless hearers, are, with others as thoughtless as themselves, taking sweet repose; their ministers, on the contrary, deny themselves much of that rest which nature demands, on purpose to wrestle with God for them, as well as to prepare fresh spiritual provision for their souls, against the next returning season for public worship. May I not, my brethren, assert with Solomon, both for you and myself, without the suspicion of ostentation, "that much study (with frequent speaking) is a weariness to the flesh." If conscientiously followed, surely, it is of all employments one of the most exhausting to the animal frame; yet with the utmost pleasure and alacrity, do the faithful servants of our adorable Emmanuel forego every fatigue attending the same, if it may but be honoured with the divine approbation, and crowned with its desired effect, on the hearts of their beloved hearers. "Wherefore we thus labor, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him;" and, "blessed indeed is that servant, whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing."

4th. Ministers of the Gospel are aptly

stiled fishermen, as to *similarity of patience* in their employment. Without a constant exercise of this ornamental virtue, neither pleasure nor prosperity can reasonably be expected in the prosecution of any scheme, or the execution of any profession whatever. Patience is a grace as absolutely requisite as it is commendable and amiable. And who needs it more, than the man who sustains the character before us? Like Job, he must be, to a proverb, patient in his calling, if an approved fisherman. Well, SIRS, and how equally necessary is it that this grace be both largely possessed, and perpetually exercised by every spiritual fisherman? how exceeding difficult their office, and how critical its faithful execution! what hinderances! what discouragements! what trials do not such meet with from within, and from without, from themselves, and from others? How various, how numerous the distressing impediments which they have to encounter daily! what strong temptations! what rugged tempers! what perverse spirits! what stubborn wills! what sordid affections! what unbounded inclinations! but above all, what adamant hearts, unsusceptible of generous and divine impressions! How averse, beyond expression, do the most able advocates for
 God

God and religion, like their heavenly master and his inspired successors, painfully find the generality of persons, to every principle of true goodness, but how prone to every kind of evil ! what friends to vice, but what foes to virtue ! what enemies to piety and holiness, but what champions for impurity and sin, for Satan and their lusts ! It would be easier to tell the several natures and shapes of fishes, than the several inclinations and tempers of men ; this makes the fishing of men a most skilful and difficult employment. Instead of being, with undissembled gratitude, all attention to the " glad tidings of salvation," thro' the glorious triumphs of the cross of Christ, what numbers are all opposition to every benevolent attempt, for mollifying and reducing them to the perfect obedience of Jesus, and his everlasting Gospel ? And yet, far from resenting such an unremitting series of complicated ingratitude at their disingenuous hands, godly ministers must submissively endure all, with a secret hope, and a pleasing peradventure that ere long they shall taste the sweet fruits of this their labor and patience, by happily taking some souls in the Gospel net, and winning them to God and goodness ; or else, that themselves shall speedily be released from amidst a perverse and crooked generation,

neration, by the body's falling asleep in Jesus, and the spirit's joyful ascension to glory.

5th. Ministers of the Gospel are fitly stiled fishermen, respecting *similarity of bazzard*. Perhaps no men are exposed to more ills, or liable to greater misfortunes, than persons in this calling. An infinite variety of unforeseen accidents attend them, by contrary winds, rough seas, dreadful storms, fatal rocks, shattered ships, broken nets, sickly partners, shortness of stores, &c. These, and other evils which might be mentioned, reduce them often to great distress. And, SIRS, is not this the heart-moving situation, the keen experience of every spiritual fisherman? Alas! they personally know it to be lamentably true. Numbers of each religious denomination among Protestant Dissenters, have chearfully resigned the most promising and inviting prospects of acquiring, what is commonly called an ample fortune, on purpose to become "fishers of men." They readily "forfook all," though powerfully persuaded to the contrary, and even threatened by those friends on whom they more immediately depended. But it is mournful to observe, that several, who forfook all for Christ and sinners, are at this juncture, in their

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outward circumstances, reduced, with their numerous families, to the most painful hardships: and this truly melancholy reflection and prospect, too justly dishearten numbers of well-disposed youths, from devoting themselves to the public ministry, and no less deter pious parents from chearfully dedicating their serious children to the important service of the sanctuary. The smallness of the salary when in office, with an insufficiency for extra expences, during a course of preparatory studies for its honorable execution, are circumstances too sensibly felt by every generous virtuous mind, in the present visible declension of Christianity through the land, and of vital religion in the several churches of Christ both in city and country.

May a good Providence speedily dispose the pious few among the rich, to take this important matter into deserved consideration, that thro' their generous influence the face of pure and undefiled religion may shortly wear a more respectable aspect through the kingdom, to the Redeemer's honor, to the consolation of his servants, and to their own particular satisfaction and joy, "when the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad, and the barren desert shall rejoice and blossom like the rose."

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Those ministers whose circumstances are the most easy in life, yet if solely dependant upon their people, have little or nothing to spare towards the desirable assistance of their necessitous friends and hearers in particular, much less to the rest of mankind in general : poor fishermen indeed ! I deeply feel for many worthy brethren, and their beloved wives and children, who, to my certain knowledge, suffer much in this respect, in several places at this instant ; either for want of inclination, or of ability in their congregations, to assist them and liberally relieve their peculiar distresses. Instead of being animated, how are they discouraged in their momentous work ? Their flocks too little considering, that the minister's honorable support, would necessarily contribute much to the reputation, if not spread of Christianity, and also secure to him not a little deserved esteem and respect, from persons of every age and character.

Again, what a rough ocean of secret opposition and open cruelty, have the dispensers of the Gospel ever waded through, in the upright discharge of their religious service ; not merely from avowed foes, but also from pretended friends ; as the best ecclesiastical historians sufficiently inform us, and which indeed our own observation and experience, with

with that especially of our persecuted fore-fathers, do undeniably confirm. But did all this hazard make them to give over? Did they desist from this generous toil? Were they deterred by the most cruel treatment, or affrighted by the most apparent dangers, which presented themselves to their full view? Not at all: a fervent unfeigned love for Christ, souls, and heaven, inevitably forbids it, so that in spite of earth and of Rome, which hath turned Peter's fishing-sloop into a galley of pirates, who fish for riches, provinces, and crowns, instead of souls; and in spite of spiritual wickednesses in high places, the apostles and other faithful ministers without dismay, ventured on, suffering nothing to make them shamefully desert so good a master, so noble a cause. Like devout Moses, they endured as seeing him who is invisible, and with him they had respect to the grand recompence of reward in glory.

6th. Ministers of the Gospel are stiled fishermen in point of *perseverance*. Nothing can be done effectually in any employment, and especially that of fishing, whether with the angle or the net, but with perseverance. And we may see persons toil day and night, forgetful both of rest and danger, on purpose to obtain success. Equally essen-

trial is perseverance for those who are called to be "fishers of men:" without this, they know very well, little or nothing is to be effected. Perseverance is the highest degree of diligence and patience; and supposes a most cheerful continuance in duty, amidst every scene of opposition and hazard, even to the last moment. And what minister of Christ, if influenced by right principles, excited by proper motives, animated with suitable views, and aiming at right ends, whose heart is in earnest warmed with an undissembled love for God, and ardent zeal for his cause, impressed with a deep sense of the worth of souls, and feels an irresistible solicitude to save guilty immortals from "the wrath to come;" what preacher of this cast and disposition will not nobly persevere, through every kind of evil, like the divine Redeemer, yea, even embrace martyrdom itself, if called to it, so he be but happily successful, as was his Divine Master and the noble army of confessors, in saving them who hear him with an everlasting salvation. The spiritual and eternal interests of the flock, next to his own immortal welfare, ever lay nearest to the faithful minister's heart. Let the nervous language of one such minister and friend of sinners speak for the whole: "My little children, of whom I travel in birth again
until

until Christ be formed in you.—I could wish, that myself were accursed from Christ, voluntarily deprived of every desirable object, and most inviting prospect on earth, for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.—The Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying, that bonds and afflictions abide me, but none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God," and so become an humble instrument of bringing many sons and daughters to glory. "Now then, as ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God," thus gain his paternal favour here, and secure to yourselves his divine approbation hereafter. We will toil day and night, and never leave, till our Great Master blesseth our fishing.

7th. Ministers of the Gospel are fitly styled fishermen in point of *similarity of success*. Success to both is indeed equally uncertain: numbers of fishermen, after a very expensive and dangerous voyage to Greenland and other places, have not sometimes taken a single fish during the whole season, to the no small injury, if not loss, of the vessel, and sad disappoint-

ment and dejection of the owners. Thus it often happens with numbers of spiritual fishermen: the most eminent and painful among them, are not always the most successful, though many are by them externally called, yet but few effectually chosen: multitudes are invited, but, alas! few are brought to true repentance: though the Gospel of salvation is preached indefinitely to all, still few, comparatively, do hear to their spiritual advantage. This hath been the lamentable complaint of many able ministers, in every age of the church, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? All the day long have I stretched out my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people." Ministers can only cast the net; it is God must give success. Paul planted perpetually with his solid judgment, and Apollos watered with his charming eloquence; yet little, no success attended either, but by the divine co-operation and blessing. Ministers often labor in vain, and spend their strength in great measure for nought: they may be heard frequently to mourn in language similar to our text; "Lord, we have uttered many prayers, shed many tears, studied and preached many discourses,

courses, agreeable to the sacred oracles;
 and that to the hazard of our ease, health,
 yea, of life itself; and yet, after all, we
 have too much reason to fear, that by these
 our long and best endeavours in thy service,
 we have not converted many, no not so much
 as one precious and immortal soul, to be our
 comfort and encouragement on earth, as well
 as our joy and crown in heaven. Oh, that
 our heads were water, and our eyes a fountain
 of tears, that we might weep day and night
 before thee, O our God, on so truly moving
 an occasion!" Though remember, my bre-
 thren, that useful ministers are not always fa-
 voured with a full knowledge of their real
 success, during their residence on earth; the
 same being painfully, though wisely, with-held
 from them by Providence, among other rea-
 sons, probably to keep them watchful, prayer-
 ful, diligent, and constantly dependent upon
 divine aid; as also to afford an additional
 sweetness and lustre to their future felicity and
 reward in heaven. What we know not now,
 in this respect, among many others, we shall,
 with our brethren and all the saints in Christ,
 eminently know hereafter, to our inexpressible
 joy and wonder. Reviving thought! amidst
 every scene of distress, during the Christian's
 sojourn in this vale of tears. And is it re-
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ally thus? Yes, Sirs. And this naturally leads me

II. To shew what sort of influence, providential disappointments attending the faithful execution of their office necessarily have upon faithful ministers. In general, they instantly fill the mind (as was the case with Simon and Andrew) full of dejection and complaints. And can you at all wonder, when spiritual fishermen are heard to lament, as is very common upon all such disagreeable occasions, saying, "Master, we have toiled all the night, have preached for a considerable space of time, and have taken nothing;" language descriptive of the pensive sentiments of their hearts, and strongly expressive of the GREAT CONCERN, the INDISPENSIBLE DUTY, and the NOBLE PRIVILEGE, HONOR, and HAPPINESS, of every sincere, though unsuccessful minister of the Gospel.

1st. This manner of speech in the text is expressive of that GREAT CONCERN which every spiritual fisherman feels, when he reflects on the little success which attends his best attempts in spreading the Gospel net. Pious ministers long for nothing so much as to see the pleasure of the Lord to prosper in their hands: they wish to see of the travail of their souls to their abundant joy; and a want of
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this makes them to mourn perpetually. They are distressed beyond conception, to think that Christianity prevails no more in the world, and that vital religion flourishes so little in the places where they live, and among the churches where, both stately and occasionally, they labour in word and doctrine. To see their thoughtless hearers, with others, wilfully reject Christ, neglect the stated means of grace, disregard the welfare of their souls, despise the ineffable bliss of heaven, and rush headlong down to the unutterable woe of hell, must needs cut real ministers of Christ to the soul, if not hurry them apace to the silent grave, where every such heart-rending scene shall disturb their holy souls no more, for "there the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary be at rest."

2d. This manner of speech in the text is strongly expressive of the INDISPENSIBLE DUTY of every spiritual fisherman. He is not undutifully to murmur at so trying a dispensation, but rather submissively, with Peter, to bemoan this his ill success, before his Gracious Master, and importunately beseech him, either to give success, or enable him to submit with a becoming patience and divine fortitude. It is the incumbent duty of such to tell their Lord, not in an ostentatious, but humble manner, of
their

their diligence in his service, of their obedience to his commands, and of the grounds of their sore distress, earnestly imploring him, at the same time, graciously to remove every cause of impediment, that so their indefatigable labours in his work, and for his honour, may henceforth succeed in a more prosperous manner. Perhaps, my brethren, it is for want of thus exercising ourselves, that our public administrations and private admonitions are not more richly crowned with a divine blessing.

3d. This manner of speech in the text, is also expressive of the NOBLE PRIVILEGE, HONOR, and HAPPINESS of every spiritual fisherman. Refreshing beyond expression, is a bosom friend in seasons of extraordinary distress, to whom the distressed (like Simon and his sorrowful companions) may pour out his troubled soul with an unshaken confidence. Surely, it is deservedly esteemed one of the sweetest blessings of life, as witness a David, and a Jonathan; but alas! how rare in the present day! yet with great pleasure, and equal truth, we may assert, that such a friend hath every good man, and especially every faithful minister, in God, who will never betray, never forsake. To Jehovah they may all go in the darkest seasons, not merely like
our

a servant to a master, but with an unreserved freedom, like as a favourite doth to his prince, or rather as a child to an indulgent parent. Our Almighty Friend is ever seated on a throne of grace, he is in a waiting posture, on purpose to hear the various grievances of his sighing children, and sooner or later will amply redress them. Oh what indulgence! what pleasure! what honor! what happiness is here! for "happy are the persons who are in such a case, yea, happy is that people whose God is the Lord." Which, my brethren, is greatest, our duty and privilege, or the divine condescension and goodness? Let us prize the former, and always admire and adore the latter, if solicitous not to "labor in vain in the Lord." Agreeable to the wise direction of that great apostle Paul, let us come henceforward, aided by our people, "boldly to a throne of grace." This we shall do, if we wish for greater success, and are desirous of having no such bitter occasion as heretofore, to complain to our God and one another, "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing." You have heard our complaints, and seen our sorrow, ask you, What's the cause? Our ill success! But whence doth it proceed? Necessary question! momentous enquiry for us all! Which leads,

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III. To point out some of the most fatal causes, from whence the ill success of spiritual fishermen doth principally proceed.

The important consideration before us, apparently respects both ministers and people; with a view, therefore, of avoiding the disagreeable charge of partiality, I shall take a distinct view of both, with that freedom, to which the subject so naturally as well as seasonably directs. It cannot be disagreeable, much less offensive; because if the Gospel does not really flourish, we are greatly concerned to know its fatal obstruction. When once the cause is known, a salutary remedy may be better prescribed; the dreadful effect may gradually cease; and Religion once more happily revive among us.

INSUFFICIENCY for the ministerial office, INDIFFERENCE in the discharge of it, IMPURITY of religious principles, IMMORALITY in practice, and DISUNION among ministers, are, in my apprehension, some of the most fatal causes, on *their part*, of preventing the desirable progress of Christianity, and delightful increase of the gospel in the present day.

I. INSUFFICIENCY for the ministerial office, is one fatal cause in our day, of the little progress of Christianity. Many persons have

have been, and now are, extremely fond of assuming the ministerial character, and too many have rushed into that sacred office, without either ability or order. Indeed this is the prevailing evil in our age; though by those who are in every view best qualified for it, it is allowed to be an office of all others the most critical, and difficult to be discharged with reputation and success. Had these too forward persons, who ignorantly mistake a turbulent fancy, and an intemperate tongue, for good natural abilities, and a heavenly call to the ministry; had they but a tolerable degree of real knowledge, and Christian modesty, they would suppress their inordinate passions for becoming teachers, and instead of promoting contention and separation, and reflecting disgrace on the Gospel of Christ, they would prudently desist from so important an undertaking, and rather diligently attend to their proper calling in life. Without censoriousness, it is arrant folly, and sinful presumption, in many supposed honest well-meaning men, to imagine that the misguided zeal of a few weak and innocent professors among the vulgar, is a sufficient call to, and the main qualification for their exercising so momentous a function. Many are in our days reputed *gifted brethren*, who are scarce able

to read the Bible at home to their children, much less to write and to speak publicly of the things of God. And yet such, must nevertheless frequently commence public preachers in the churches of Christ. SIRS, if the work be so easy, and its necessary qualifications so few, as these intruders pretend, what little occasion was there for those ever memorable lamentations of an inspired prophet, and an apostle, to be particularly recorded for the special consideration and caution of every succeeding candidate for the sacred ministry. "Then said I, Ah Lord God ! behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child," and "who is sufficient for these things ?" Very far be it from me to censure *all* who are usually styled lay preachers ; many of them are deservedly allowed to be persons of good natural abilities, and real piety ; and these have often been heard to lament, with unfeigned concern, the unhappy loss of a liberal education, and which (animated by their own feelings) they have never failed to bestow on their children, so far as their outward circumstances would possibly admit. But, on the other hand, must it not be confessed, that many *lay preachers* have most ignorantly plumed themselves in the actual want both of decency and learning ? ever vehemently inveighing, both
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in public and private, against those who, thro' the smiles of Providence, and a close application for years, are well known to be richly possessed of both, to the great reputation of their religious character, and the honor of their exalted station.

If these teachers of others, who bark at what they cannot reach, did expose themselves only, it would be well; but it is too apparent, they also expose our holy faith to the ridicule of gainsayers and scoffers. It was not without reason, that the Apostle Paul, under the Holy Ghost's influence, observed, "that a bishop or pastor should not be a novice (either in years or knowledge) lest being lifted up with pride, he fell into the condemnation of the devil." And it is too well known by observation, that persons of the least learning are the most peremptory and self-sufficient. Men of the greatest deficiency in knowledge are the most dogmatical, presuming, and censorious: words are ever ready to them, and they will utter them with great vehemence: but, Sirs, of what avail to the understanding, and to the soul, are words without knowledge, ~~and~~ ^{leaves} without fruit? The prophet Isaiah hath aptly drawn the state of such teachers, with their hearers, "It is with them, as when an hungry man dreameth that he eateth;

eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty; or as when a thirsty man dreameth that he drinketh; but he awaketh, and behold, he is faint." The pastors which are according to God's heart, we are also assured by Jeremiah, are such only as "feed the people with knowledge and understanding."

2d. *Personal indifference* in the discharge of the ministerial office, is another fatal cause, in the present day, of the little progress of Christianity, and small success of the Gospel. Indifference to duty gradually leads to a partial, if not total, neglect thereof: such a spirit naturally prevents every due preparation for it, and consequently lead to a sad remissness in its reputable execution; which unwarrantable conduct, if it prevails, must unavoidably hinder the prosperity of religion in the land. When the fleece is preferred before the welfare of the flock, and "the seeking our own to the things which are Jesus Christ's," when an indolent, inattentive, lifeless frame appears our true characteristic, and we become almost strangers to study, self-examination, and prayer in the closet, (which are three principal marks of a true minister) whatever may be our abilities, either natural or acquired, for the solemn work, still such luke-warm ministers will do but little honour
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to their character, meet with but little success in their divine employ, and consequently gain to themselves but little applause from God and good men. "*Salus populi suprema lex esto.*" The salvation of souls is the end of preaching, and must regulate it: it **MUST**, if we mean to be prosperous in the service of our Lord and Master.

3d. *Impurity of religious principles* is another fatal cause, in the present day, of the little progress of Christianity. Ministers (if with propriety they may be so called) whose discourses are not only indigested, vague, and superficial as to manner, but really erroneous, anti-scriptural, as to their matter; do, like unskilful physicians, instead of extracting the present, on the contrary, they inject fresh poison into the depraved hearts of their infected patients. Instead of inculcating pure principles and evangelical sentiments on the minds of their hearers, how many do quite the reverse, and thus fill them, as Papists do their votaries, with false peace, and delude them with vain hopes and false joys, to the great injury of their own souls, as well as the deceived souls of those who hear them. Great is the happiness to have skill to embrace the truth ourselves as it is in Jesus, and to be faithful, "rightly to divide the word of

of truth," in preaching it to others. "Many have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace,"

4th. *Immorality in practice*, among those who sustain the ministerial office, is another fatal cause, in our day, of the small increase of the Gospel. Errors in principle are bad, but a vicious life is far worse. To see ministers of any denomination greatly deficient, respecting ability, application, and judgment, is very disagreeable and painful to a truly serious mind; but to behold such, equally wanting in point of morality, piety, and virtue, is most disgusting and shocking. "Do as we say, and not as we do," is with such, a very common but ridiculous speech; and in consequence of which, they render themselves the deserved objects of universal contempt. This open prostitution of their sacred character, publicly disgraces the ministerial office, dishonours that God they pretend to serve, disheartens every religious enquirer after piety, not a little hardens the workers of iniquity in their present evil courses, stabs the religion of Jesus to the heart, and thus "works out for themselves swift destruction." God will one day sorely punish this their wicked conduct; his awful woes, denounced against such scandalous and wicked shepherds, shall be by him most signally executed

outed in their everlasting perdition. It was an ancient complaint, "his watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark, sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber, yea they are greedy dogs, which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his gain from his quarter.—Come ye, say they, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink, and to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant." A graceless ministry is one of the heaviest curses which can be inflicted upon a nation; for, as one well observed, "unless the soul be well furnished within, with the beauties of holiness, the best outward ornaments are but like noble trappings on the ass's back, which only serve to render the silly beast ridiculous." If ministers of the Gospel are not savingly converted and made holy themselves, how can they reasonably expect instrumentally to convert and make others holy here, and meet for heaven hereafter? Impossible! — He who would fish men for God, must be first caught himself.

5th. *Disunion among ministers* is another fatal cause of the little success of the Gospel in our day. Nothing can hurt our Master's cause more, or prevent its extensive spread, than this too

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Growing evil. Did spiritual fishermen agree better together, with all godly sincerity and brotherly kindness, spreading the Gospel net at every convenient season, probably they also would be as richly indulged as were Simon and his partners, and experience more or less the sweet fruits of their mutual affection, and united endeavours. It is for want of the spirit of universal love among ministers and protestant brethren, and thro' the prevalence of a captious, narrow, bigotted, censorious, anathematizing and condemning spirit, fit emblem of hell! that those to whom the true evidences of a Gospel minister do really belong, are not more extensively useful in the faithful execution of their delightful office. My Brethren, what a pity is it, that the world in general, together with our people and ourselves, should know these things to be so affectingly true; for which gainsayers deride both us, and the sacred cause of our Master, upon every occasion. These are the causes, affecting causes, lamentable obstructions on *our* part! May God mercifully be pleased quickly to remove them, through the benign influences of his Holy Spirit!

On the other hand, as respecting the most fatal hinderances which occur on the part of the *people*, to prevent the success and extensive usefulness of faithful ministers, give me leave with equal freedom to remark the following, as some

of the principal. — A DISINCLINATION to hear the Gospel preached—great INATTENTION when they do—REFUSING TO REDUCE what they hear into practice---DISAFFECTION among professors in general---and the WANT OF A SPIRIT OF AFFECTION AND PRAYER among congregations in particular.

1. A visible *disinclination* in mankind to hear the Gospel preached, is one fatal hinderance to the success of its faithful dispensers : a vice as dreadful as it is prevailing, in the present “ day of small things.” What signifies Simon and his brother fishermen spreading their nets, if there are no fish near to be caught therein ? What avails ministers preaching, if they have comparatively no hearers ? If no people, then of consequence no converts. The extraordinary gift of miracles is long since ceased, and ministers find it faint studying, heartless praying, and also lifeless preaching to empty seats, stone pillars, and naked walls. Would you, my hearers, like to be preachers to such an inanimate auditory ? You would not ; neither then do we. We are grieved to behold the Sabbath prostituted to every sort of diversion. On the day of sacred rest, to be irreligious, to be profaners of the Sabbath, is presumptuously deemed by many, quite fashionable and polite : but considering their high stations,

with their relative and social connections, they ought, like Abraham and Joshua, to recommend to their inferiors and equals, quite a different conduct, by a devout example daily, in the closet, in the family, in the sanctuary, and in the world. "For I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him." "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Alas! whither is Religion fled! Few ministers have reason to imitate their divine Master, in seeking out larger places of worship for crowded audiences; the curiosity of persons is now as small as their piety; very few are disposed to hear what the preacher hath to say, for God, religion, and for their souls welfare. We appear to want the rod of persecution, then possibly we shall prize the word of salvation to good purpose.

2. *Great inattention* when persons come to the house of God, is another fatal hinderance to the minister's usefulness and success. Hearers (if they may be properly deemed such) who habituate themselves to an indolent and drowsy, if not a deriding posture in the public assembly, cannot expect profit. Their posture and behaviour

viour prove, that they are not conscious of being immediately under the all-pervading eye of the God of ordinances; a Being, whose omniscience narrowly inspects the inmost recesses of the heart, and who will one day justly arraign their consummate rudeness, and severely punish their unpardonable behaviour before men and angels. Their deportment and example is well known to be in wilful disobedience to his positive orders: he most solemnly commands, "Keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary; I am the Lord."

3. *Mankind refusing to reduce what they bear into practice*, is another fatal bar to the success of faithful dispensers of the Gospel. Though persons stately attend upon public institutions; though "they come as God's people come, and sit as God's people sit;" though, Pharisee-like, they put on a demure countenance and sanctified look, as if they were all holiness and devotion; and to whom their several preachers may appear agreeable and pleasant, both as to manner and matter; yet, Sirs, notwithstanding all this outward shew, the plausible pretensions of many are hypocritical and vain. They at best but resemble the stony-ground hearers in the parable, who hear the word, but do it not; for their unrenewed hearts are intensely fixed on their different sinful objects, so that no saving impressions, by the best
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of methods, can be made upon them. Doctrines are disregarded, precepts slighted, duties neglected, evangelical obedience forgotten by them. Able ministers with such strive in vain, and the progress of religion is thus in a great measure prevented.

4. *Great disaffection* among professors in general, is another fatal hindrance to the usefulness of Gospel ministers. There was a time, as hath been with pleasure often remarked, when the avowed foes of Christianity openly acknowledged, that universal affection, and undissembled esteem, universally subsisted among the disciples of Christ, in the most conspicuous manner; which godlike spirit of mutual concord, Christians of every band keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, not a little shamed, as well as vexed their adversaries, promoted the cause of piety and virtue, reflected high honour on their Divine Saviour, afforded unspeakable joy to themselves, and no less consolation to their fellow-saints, in every season of persecution and distress. But now, *Sirs*, this delightful scene is vanished, and our inveterate enemies, with too much truth, assert quite the reverse, particularly concerning Protestant Dissenters, to the no small reproach of our Christian name and character. How displeasing this to our Divine Redeemer! How injurious to his Gospel! How distressing to his laborious servants! Remember, how

how he himself condescended to set a pattern for his disciples to copy after, an amiable pattern of humility, meekness, and love, from his birth to the cross. Remember also his words, "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another; and,—hereby shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another."

5. *The want of a spirit of affection and prayer* among the several congregations, is another very fatal hindrance to the desirable usefulness of every faithful minister of the Gospel. If there be not a mutual esteem subsisting between ministers and their people, or between the people themselves, what prospect of success can there possibly be? or with what kind of spirit and disposition will they engage in the several duties of religion? and what is a minister to do, unless indulged by Providence with a pious and praying people? It will be next to a miracle, if much success attends him in his work, without this powerful succour. And, to be plain, it is because mutual love is waxen cold, and social prayer so neglected, among the members and hearers in our several assemblies, that our stated labours prove no more effectual, either in a converting, edifying, or consolatory view. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity: it is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard,

beard, that went down to the skirts of his garment, as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion, for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, in all the churches of his saints." If, therefore, ministers and people do not constantly cultivate brotherly kindness and prayer, it is unreasonable for Christians to expect that the God of love and peace will vouchsafe to smile upon them in his public courts, or make their ministers way prosperous among them. Hence it is, that after the most fervent and persevering efforts, many are heard to complain, "Master, we have toiled all the night, preached on to this our dying day, and have taken nothing, or gained but small success." Distressing reflection! "Brethren, pray for us." But will these innumerable discouragements and obstructions, which painfully attend the sincere servants of Christ in their great work, make them to desist, and force them with grief to give up all hopes of success? Will these trying evils compel them to stop, and so prosecute their too unsuccessful office no more? Indeed they will not. A genuine regard for Christ and immortal souls, with proper sense of their duty and calling, jointly conspire absolutely to forbid it.—This naturally brings me to observe,

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IV. That conscientious ministers will always view it as their indispensable duty, amidst every discouraging scene of opposition, to persevere even to their dying moments. Till this solemn, but (to such, an) advantageous period, their unwearied diligence will correspond with their dutiful resolution: "At thy word, I will let down the net." This they do in **CHEARFUL OBEEDIENCE** to their Lord's command, from a *secret EXPECTATION* of better success, that mankind may be left **INEXORABLE** at last, and that they may **APPROVE THEMSELVES UNTO GOD**, and secure the promised reward.

1. Spiritual fishermen are resolved, with divine aid, amidst every discouraging scene of opposition, to persevere to their dying moments, in letting down the Gospel net, from *cheerful obedience* to their Lord's commands. His orders influenced Simon and his partners to respread and let down their net; and it is the Saviour's will which so readily disposes faithful ministers, amidst every powerful impediment, to imitate their wise example. They are his servants; from him their furniture, and from him their commission is derived: they know he expects that they should always obey him, and they are determined so to do, without hesitation, at all seasons, under all circumstances, and on all occasions, saying, "Master, at thy word, we will preach thy Gospel."

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2. Spiritual fishermen will persevere amidst every discouraging scene of opposition, in letting down the Gospel net, from an *expectation of still better success*. It was this which encouraged Peter and his companions to renew their attempt. They apprehended that the great Author of miracles had some benevolent intention towards them in his generous breast, as they indeed soon experienced to their great joy: "When they had this done, they enclosed a great multitude of fishes, and their net brake." It is this pleasing hope which secretly animates the ministers of the Gospel now, as it ever hath done, to imitate the apostles discreet example; and as numbers have, so I trust we shall experience somewhat of the same good success too, if but possessed of their spiritual graces, and disposed to follow their patient conduct. We can but cast the net, in this we will persevere. God bless our fishing, and make it subservient to his glory, and sinners salvation.

3. Spiritual fishermen, through divine aid, will conscientiously persevere to the end, amidst all opposition, in letting down the Gospel net, that sinners may be *inexcusable*. Means are inseparably connected with the end, both as to attaining holiness and happiness: yet what multitudes of thoughtless, though immortal souls, ungratefully slight the Gospel, make light of Christ
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and his servants, and turn their backs on divine institutions, though calculated, and graciously appointed by heaven, to promote mens best interests for both worlds. But this disingenuous and presumptuous conduct will soon meet with its deserved recompence at the hands of Jehovah! Faithful ministers, by repeated exhortations and labours, are determined to condemn their weakness and madness in sin; they will not give over, but prosecute their great work even unto death; so that impenitent sinners can have nothing to alledge against them here, any more than to urge in their own favor, before their offended Creator and impartial Judge hereafter.

4. Spiritual fishermen are resolved to persevere in letting down the Gospel net, that they may most strictly *approve themselves unto God*, and secure the promised reward. Had Simon and his companions refused to have let down their net at the Saviour's word, they would certainly have been extremely culpable, as well as missed the amazing draught; but as they obeyed, they escaped censure, and gained a large reward for their faith and obedience. And such will be the conduct of every real minister, though he should miss of the success; he will steadily pursue his studies and labors, to prevent transgressors from imputing to him their final damnation.

nation, or God's requiring the blood of such, in the great day, at his hands. On the contrary, his endeavour is, to have God, his own conscience, and his hearers, publicly to acquit him, as free from the blood of all men; and then, whether our blessed Master hath granted us little or much success, a consciousness of having been sincere and upright in his service, to the utmost of our abilities, will make us contented and serene in life, comfortable at death, and secure beyond the grave. We may triumphantly exult in our departing moments, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, and I have kept the faith; henceforth, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge will give to me at that day, and not to me only, but to all them also who love his appearing." He promises to all his persevering servants and followers, "be ye faithful to death, and I will give you a crown of everlasting life." May this character, honor, and blessedness be ours! "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast and unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know your labor shall not be in vain in the Lord."

And now, Sirs, what remains, but that we commune with our hearts, on the important things which have been suggested. I cannot conclude, without adding a few short reflections, which

which, I think, merit our serious and constant meditation, both as ministers and professors.

1. How extremely careful should persons be, in impartially examining the various motives and grounds of their several pretensions to the ministerial office, before they presume to exercise the same in the church of God? Many have run, through ignorance, idleness, pride, ambition, and waited not to be honourably sent by God. Many have been also injudiciously called by man, but the Great Master never said to them, "Follow me, and become fishers of men."

2. Are ministers of the Gospel by Christ himself styled fishermen? Then let all his approved ones ever count it their highest honor to bear the lowest names for his sake, and submit most chearfully to what an ignorant and perverse generation may term one of the meanest callings in life. Let us count all things but dung and dross, so as we can promote the salvation of souls, and advance that best of interests, the Gospel and kingdom of Christ, which is inseparably connected with the honor of that best of masters, "who loved me, and gave himself for me." Irresistible motive!

3. Are ministers successes in general so small, and their obstructions so numerous? Then let both preachers and hearers examine, and consider the several fatal causes from whence the same
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do unhappily proceed, and endeavour, each for themselves, instantly to remove them. Thus you will manifest that you wish in earnest for the declension of popery, vice, and infidelity; and that piety, religion, and virtue may prosper more extensively in the land.

4. Are some happy few, among the faithful dispensers of the Gospel, in any degree successful in their important employment? How peculiarly careful should such highly favoured persons be, together with their spiritual converts, who have heartily yielded themselves to be taken for Christ, to ascribe the whole, as did Simon, to the gracious indulgence of their Divine Master, to whom alone it is due, and not to man's skill and ability; to which idol human nature is too prone, however, to pay its superstitious adoration; whereas, "To thy name and grace be the praise," ought devoutly to be their perpetual language.

5. Spiritual fishermen, who may not experience the same desirable success, may also comfort themselves under seasons of discouragement and dejection, with this reviving consideration, that though, like Simon and his partners, they may be suffered to toil long, labor much, and seemingly take nothing in the Gospel net; nevertheless, Christ, their Master, highly approves them: he may yet bless their labors with success, and their
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future reward is sure. Their immortal crown will be glorious beyond conception, in the church triumphant above.

6. Would ministers be more successful in their momentous calling? Remember, that unwearied application, personal holiness, fervent prayer, evangelical obedience and love to Christ, and to one another, are instrumentally the best methods to obtain it. May ministerial as well as Christian affection, more universally prevail among all Protestant denominations, who agree in the essentials of Christianity, and live correspondent; but, may this especially be the happy case among Protestant Dissenters!

7. How wretchedly deplorable is the awful situation of those persons, who have hitherto obstinately resisted every endearing attempt of being happily taken in the Gospel net, by their spiritual fishermen; who have no desire of being drawn, through the energy of divine grace, to Christ and holiness, but live, and seem resolved to die, under the rich means of salvation, in a state of final impenitence! And how tremendous will be the final doom of those teachers, if after preaching to others, and laboring to save them, they themselves should be cast away.

Lastly, Let faithful ministers and pious Christians submissively wait for their dismissal from
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this vale of tears, and joyfully look up, aspiring to that world of bliss which awaits them. A state, SIRs, where no disappointments or sorrows, either temporal or spiritual, springing from our selves or others, will approach us, and where our joy will be full. May all be preparing daily to depart from the present state of imperfection and sin, to that perfect and undefiled inheritance where Christ dwells! in whose blisful presence, and at the right hand of God, the faithful fishers, and all who were taken by them for Christ, will have the distinguished honor to be seated, and share for ever with the host of heaven, in that glory which passes both description and conception.

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